

States sought in alliances and conscript armies, to plunge into the fray only if our vital interests appeared to demand it or treaty obligations were at stake. The policy familiarly known as splendid isolation, or, as I prefer to call it, the free hand, seemed the wisest course till the close of the nineteenth century, and Salisbury stood by it till the end of his career. The face of Europe was continually changing, and he felt no confidence in any Continental Power. He shared Palmerston's conviction that England has no eternal friendships and no eternal enmities, only eternal interests. As the old chess-player bent over the board he congratulated himself on his liberty to choose his moves. In his own unconventional phraseology, "British policy is to float lazily downstream, occasionally putting out a diplomatic boat-hook to avoid collisions."

Salisbury was typically English in disliking large-scale commitments and in his readiness for a deal. The first significant revelation in *British Documents on the Origins of the War 1898-1914* is his proposal to Russia for a delimitation of spheres of influence in China and Turkey, a promising overture terminated by the seizure of Port Arthur in 1898. When, however, we were invited by Germany in 1901 to enter the Triple Alliance, he argued in an impressive memorandum that the liability of having to defend German and Austrian frontiers were heavier than that of having to defend the British Isles against France. The German Ambassador spoke of our isolation as becoming a serious danger for us, but it would hardly be wise to incur novel and most onerous obligations in order to guard against an imaginary danger. Lansdowne was more ready than his chief to consider some limited scheme of Anglo-German association, but he was equally opposed to entanglement in the meshes of the Triple Alliance. There is a direct conflict of testimony between the German

and British documents as to which side initiated the alliance discussions. Eckardstein declares it was Lansdowne, Lansdowne attributes it to Eckardstein. I prefer the testimony of the Foreign Secretary, not because he was our own countryman, but because Eckardstein was hampered by the injunctions of Holstein. Whoever started it, the project of an Anglo-German alliance collapsed and was never revived. The most important revelations in our early volumes enable us to reconstruct in detail the formation of the Entente Cordiale. The years 1902-4 witnessed two epoch-making changes